

## MY SAY: The true meaning of heritage

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

Article

The Edge - 07/28/2008

The recent global recognition of Penang and Melaka as part of the Unesco World Heritage List is indeed a hard-earned tribute for many Malaysians. It took no less than a decade to clinch this feat; but like they say, to win once is much easier than to keep on winning over and over again.

We therefore cannot rest on our laurels if we want to keep this new status forever. The question then: are we, especially the people of the two "sites", ready for this? We now cannot depend any longer on committees or groups of interested persons, but this time, the entire population must be involved. We have no choice and here is where the new challenge begins.

To be sure, Penang and Melaka deserve to be listed. After all, according to the Unesco Heritage list website: "The two towns constitute a unique architectural and cultural townscape without parallel anywhere in East and Southeast Asia." As such, there is every reason for all Malaysians to celebrate this rare honour.

Sadly, however, in contrast to the Cambodians who took to the streets in Phnom Penh to rejoice the listing of Watt Preah Vihear at the Thai-Cambodian border, despite being controversial, the Malaysian response seems rather lukewarm. Could it be because we are too caught up with our own self-imposed miseries and too busy circulating rumours that we have no time to be grateful for little mercies?

Sure, times are hard and we may be preoccupied, but so too are the Cambodians and in fact, more so. Yet, they know how to value what to take pride in when it comes to their heritage, which essentially symbolises their culture and its meaning to life — what more when it is of worldwide significance, catapulting local relevance into global acceptance and prominence.

It is no wonder then that there are more than a dozen of such sites and monuments listed in Cambodia. In stark contrast, Malaysians are less interested; at times, some are more keen to destroy whatever little we have left to share.

Realising this, it is still not too late for us to show our appreciation — maybe, this being our first historic heritage city listing, we are a little unsure on how to react, except merely thinking about the tourist currencies expected to flow in as a result. Analysts are saying that an inscription as World Heritage Site could push prices of buildings up almost immediately. Developers, local and foreign, will be eager to snap up pre-war buildings relatively on the cheap and turn them into potential business opportunities. The irony is that the parties once most resistant to the requirements of Unesco guidelines, now seem to have the most to gain from this exercise, monetarily speaking.

Of course, this would be good for some, but to most it is shortlived. A massive influx of tourism has been shown to, time and time again, destroy more than it builds, especially when it comes to heritage sites. Cast our minds back to the once crystal clear waters of Batu Ferringhi not too long ago. Today, it is a national embarrassment when compared to what others in the region have to offer.

The listing, therefore, must take us beyond just the physical form and what's tangible; not just what is good for today in terms of the tourist dollars. Instead, it should also entail the reconstruction of what we have lost, and continue to lose, in terms of the intangible substance and for the longer-term as well.

For example, the common heritage created by the Peranakans in both historic locations which, according to the eminent Malaysian historian, Tan Sri Khoo Kay Kim, is arguably more Malaysian, at least at the level of cultural heritage. Unfortunately, according to Khoo, "over the years, the community was affected by numerous changes as a result of which the boundary that divides the Peranakan from the rest of the Chinese has become increasingly vague".

In other words, devoid of "substance," heritage is rather shallow and hollow. In this case, what the Peranakans have built over centuries as a unique "Malaysian" identity, which we desperately try to construct, cannot be squandered any longer if we are really serious, to genuinely preserve our heritage.

Similarly, the deeper understanding of heritage must necessarily stretch as far back in time, even before someone laid claims to be the "new" founders of these two sites. Unless this is done in earnest, the true meaning and significance of heritage will remain superficial and elusive, even to the indifferent tourists. What more to Malaysians themselves.

[Terms & Conditions](#)